

FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT AND DECISION NOTICE
for the
REESTABLISHMENT of a BULL TROUT FISHERY on LAKE KOOCANUSA

May 28, 2004

Project Proposal and Justification:

Based on the purpose and justification for the project, the draft environmental assessment, and public comment received (see Attachment A), I recommend that the proposed action to reestablish a limited bull trout fishery in Koocanusa Reservoir be implemented. This decision elevates the intent of FWP to reopen the bull trout fishery. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has the ultimate authority under the Endangered Species Act and must implement procedural rule changes to allow legal take of the species.

As part of this decision, FWP offers the following recommendations that will act to protect bull trout and provide recreational fishing opportunity:

Lake Koocanusa Proposed Fishing Regulation:

The proposed action by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) is to modify fishing regulations to re-establish a limited recreational bull trout fishery at Lake Koocanusa. At Koocanusa the proposed limits and restrictions for bull trout are as follows.

- 1) Catch card system that allows for the yearly capture of two (2) bull trout, only one daily and in possession, at Koocanusa.
- 2) Anglers that acquire catch cards will be required to provide name, address and phone number for a creel survey to identify the success of the program.
- 3) There will be a seasonal reservoir-wide harvest closure (catch and release) from March 1 through May 31 to protect bull trout as they migrate along the shorelines of the reservoir.

Upon catching a bull trout, an angler must:

- 1) Kill it at once, tag it, include it on the creel card, and count it as the daily and possession limit, or
- 2) Immediately release it.

It would be unlawful to possess a live bull trout for any reason. This change in the bull trout regulation would not affect regulations for cutthroat trout, rainbow trout, burbot, and kokanee in the reservoir.

In addition, MFWP proposes to monitor both redd counts in indicator streams and spring gill netting, and recommends that:

- 1) Bull trout catch per net in Koocanusa spring gill nets remains above 70% of the long-term (sliding 10-year) average of a stable or increasing trend.
- 2) Bull trout redd counts in Koocanusa monitoring tributaries remain above 70% of the long-term (sliding 10-year) average of a stable or increasing trend or 667 redds in Wigwam River drainage and 67 in Grave Creek drainage, whichever is greater.

The fishery will be reassessed if one or more of these criteria are not met.

If the fishery is closed because it fails to meet these criteria, it will not be reopened until both criteria are met for two successive years.

Take for bull trout in Lake Koocanusa shall be open from June 1 to the last day of February of the following year with a daily and possession limit of one bull trout. Upon catching a bull trout, an angler must either kill it at once and count it as the limit or release it immediately.

The reason for a seasonal closure to take is to protect individual stocks of fish that congregate off reservoir tributaries and along the shorelines of the reservoir during spawning migrations. In the reservoir, adult and juvenile bull trout are present, and adult angling mortality will likely be reduced as we found in Swan Lake where adults comprised only 53 percent of bull trout harvested (Rumsey 1996). The catch-and-kill regulation prevents "high-grading" for progressively larger fish, thereby reducing delayed angling mortality.

Catch-and-release fishing only would be allowed for bull trout from March 1 through May 31.

All other waters within the Kootenai River drainage would remain closed to the taking and/or intentional fishing for bull trout.

Monitoring

Also included within the decision to allow a limited bull trout fishery in Koocanusa is the proposal to monitor angler pressure and harvest. This information, combined with spring gill net and redd count monitoring, will help ascertain the health and stability of the Koocanusa bull trout population.

Based on the purpose and justification for the project, the draft environmental assessment, and the public comment received, I recommend the reestablishment of a bull trout sport fishery in Lake Koocanusa.

Daniel P. Vincent, Region One Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date